Security Sector Reform and the Competition for Power in Lebanon

ABSTRACT The interest of the Lebanese elites who launched the security sector reform (SSR) process was in to regain control and influence over the security sector more than to create independent institutions respectful of human rights. At a time of deep social and political crisis, not only had these actors lost their previous influence on the security sector but also this sector had become a source of power, largely in the hands of their political opponents, and was being used against them. This case illustrates how power competition between elites can disrupt the process of SSR, or even be the very origin of the conception of SSR programs.

KEYWORDS: Lebanon, security sector reform, security sector, sociology of power, Rafik Hariri, Hezbollah

INTRODUCTION

Interest in undertaking a reform of the security sector (SS) in Lebanon first emerged among a section of the Lebanese elite in 2005 after the assassination, on 14 February, of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, and the subsequent withdrawal of Syria from Lebanese territory. While nothing new, the need for security sector reform (SSR) was indisputable. The Lebanese SS, which was dependent on the state, was ineffective (underequipped, understaffed, and undertrained), inefficient (with overlapping functions, poor or no coordination between its forces, etc.), highly corrupt (Blanford 2006; Nashabe 2009), and in flagrant violation of human rights (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2013).

1. Among the police, for instance, there was a lack of basic equipment (no computers or photocopiers, cells without any furnishings, non-existent forensic research materials, etc.) or inadequate equipment, with weapons, uniforms, and some vehicles more appropriate to a military force than a police force (Nashabe 2009).

2. Nashabe (2009) describes the low level of training among a large number of its members.
However, it was not until the important mobilization in response to the assassination of the multimillionaire former prime minister that the question of the SS appeared in the public debate in earnest. The state’s intelligence services and various security forces were considered complicit by much of the country’s population, if not directly responsible for the assassination. For that reason, one of the main demands coming out of the mass mobilizations after Hariri’s death was the resignation of the leaders of the SS, in addition to the withdrawal of Syria and the resignation of President Émile Lahoud. These mobilizations were led by an alliance of anti-Syrian political actors who began to come together in 2004 and consolidated with the assassination of Hariri. The group became known as the March 14 Alliance, after the mass demonstration that took place in Beirut on that date in 2005, one month after the assassination and in response to the demonstration led by pro-Syrian actors, including most notably Hezbollah, on 8 March, producing what is known as the March 8 Alliance. In the months after the mobilizations, Hariri’s political heirs won the elections held between May and June, including his son Saad Hariri and future Prime Minister Fouad Siniora from the Future Movement (Tayyar Al Mustaqbal) political group, the largest party in the March 14 Alliance. It was the elites from that alliance who would promote SSR from within the government.

However, after years of technical and financial support from several foreign countries to reform the SS, its principal problems have not been resolved (van Veen 2015). The overlapping of functions continues, and coordination between the forces is considerably limited. The Internal Security Forces (ISF), the national police force that reports to the prime minister (and is, therefore, in the hands of those demanding and promoting reform of the SS), were highlighted by HRW in 2013—despite the advances made—for frequent abuse and torture inflicted, above all, on the most vulnerable (HRW 2013). At the same time, the opinion of the Lebanese about the ISF continued to be low as the force showed itself to be incapable of handling some of the security challenges in the country. In a broader frame of reference, Khattab and Myrttinen (2014, 7) explain that, in 2014, “Both women and men raised issues of partiality, partisan influence and perceived corruption and nepotism as major concerns undermining trust in SSIs [SS institutions].” Additionally, rather than perceiving state security institutions as serving them, Lebanese citizens regarded these institutions as beholden to the political parties—without political acquiescence, focus group participants said the official security apparatus of the Lebanese state would not intervene in security incidents to protect them (7).
This was not only perceived by the Lebanese as a 2016 report from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reveals: “There are high levels of perceived corruption within the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Judiciary. [...] There appears to be only limited political will for major reform of the security and justice sector or to promote strict compliance with human rights standards, which contributes to a generally slow pace of change and limited sustainability of some donor interventions in these fields” (Burdett 2016, 11). The report goes on to state that: “ISF needs to improve its responsiveness to community safety and security needs and its compliance with international human rights standards. Such enhanced responsiveness to the community will require significant transformation of how the ISF does its work, including through major improvements in capacity, performance and accountability” (12). In short, a near lack of progress in the essential areas of SSR raises the following questions: What does foreign support truly consist of? What are the real objectives of the elites promoting SSR processes if the body over which they have direct control has not even made any substantial progress?

Two potential aims are behind the Siniora government’s demand for foreign aid for SSR: obtaining financial resources and equipment and the transfer of technical knowledge. However, the importance of the two should be treated in relative terms. On the one hand, countries such as Saudi Arabia have provided financial support since the civil war to maintain the Lebanese army without requesting a reform process.3 On the other, according to the Rohan Burdett’s UNDP report (Burdett 2016) and van Veen (2015), the difficulty in reforming the SS is due more to the lack of will among the Lebanese elites than to insufficient knowledge in the Lebanese context. In this respect, Burdett writes that: “There are numerous champions of reform within ministries, security forces, and the Judiciary and Prosecution, particularly at mid-level but also among some of the most senior officials. Moreover, there is strong intellectual capital in the ministries and agencies. This presence of champions and technically capable partners allows space for institutional development and capacity building in a number of areas” (Burdett 2016, 11).

Understanding how and why these SSR programs have appeared in Lebanon requires an analysis from the perspective of the sociology of power.4

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3. Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt also made donations (Adib 2012).
4. Very briefly, the Sociology of Power seeks to determine the primary actors (understood as individuals or alliances of individuals, but not abstract entities) in a system and their power resources, bearing in mind that their position entails constant competition with the other actors for the differential accumulation of power. These actors establish alliances and maintain conflicts with the others
The explanation for the Lebanese government’s request for international support to undertake an SSR must consider the dynamic of the power relations between the Lebanese elites at that time. An analysis from this perspective helps to explain the real motives for the action by discounting, to some extent, the justifications or arguments of the elites that may be simply a discourse, used as a resource of power.

This study focuses on the dynamic of power relations between the Lebanese elites who controlled (or were able to compete for control of) the repressive state forces, in this case both police and military, and the various intelligence services. Although justice and the penal system also form part of the SS, they are beyond the scope of this study for reasons of space. Likewise, no analysis is made of the non-state SS that forms part of the plural SS that characterizes Lebanon. A brief explanation of the changes in the Lebanese power regime that led the main actors to confront each other for control of the SS is followed by an analysis of the reform and its consequences.

THE POWER REGIME BEFORE THE SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL

The period between the end of the civil war and the Syrian withdrawal can be divided into two phases. The first is characterized by the appearance of a uniquely important figure in the Lebanese system, who nonetheless had very little control over the state’s military and repressive forces: Hariri—although Hariri did establish close alliances with the Syrian actors who maintained control of this power resource, allowing him to benefit from their services. The second phase, which began in 1998 and consolidated first in 2000 and then in 2002, was characterized by the inception of the conflict between President Lahoud, supported by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, against Hariri, his

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5. Including, most notably, Hezbollah’s military and intelligence apparatus, although there are many examples of this type of entity in general.


7. Lahoud became president with the backing of Bashar al-Assad (and the approval of France and the United States). During the Civil War, he was loyal to Syria (e.g., using military forces to fight the division of the army controlled by Michel Aoun, who wanted Syria to withdraw from Lebanese territory). This allowed him to stay on as army chief of staff after the war. From this position, he remained loyal to Damascus and cultivated a close relationship with Assad, while clashing with Hariri. Because of this, the army was probably the security sector force where Hariri had the least influence.
circle, and his Syrian allies.\footnote{Hariri was closely allied with some of the key members of the regime of Hafez al-Assad, including Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam (responsible for administering Lebanon until 1998), the army chief of staff, General Hikmat al-Shihabi, and the Syrian intelligence chief in Lebanon, General Ghazi Kanaan, who locked horns with successor al-Assad, allegedly to help Khaddam become president in his place (ICG 2005b; Meur 2012).} This began a competition for control of the state institutions, including the SS, although Hariri was starting at a disadvantage which became more acute as his Syrian allies lost control of the Lebanese SS.

As the 1990s progressed, the balance of forces in the complex Lebanese system maintained by Syria as a strategy to ensure control began to disappear with the emergence of Hariri. Once the weapons between the various Lebanese militias had cooled (Hariri was one of the few key actors in Lebanon who had not led a militia), he was able to employ his important power resources. The most notable was his immense fortune, augmented by his notable prestige, a by-product of his important charity work. His international alliances were also consequential; he was a confidant of the Saudi royal family, a friend of Jacques Chirac and other eminent European, Arab, and American figures, and had ties to various international organizations. Moreover, after 1993, all these important power resources were reinforced by the creation of an important media network (Blanford 2006; Ortiz de Zárate 2015; Naba 2011).

However, Hariri became a real player on the Lebanese political scene when he became prime minister after co-opting the country’s key economic–financial elites with his neoliberal program and reconstruction macro-projects. By taking control of a significant share of the state institutions, he was able to further develop his enormous patronage network and maintain his influence through corruption,\footnote{For an analysis of the extensive corruption in Lebanon, see Leenders (2012). Blanford (2006) also presents a detailed account of numerous corruption cases, most with Hariri playing the role of corruptor.} while simultaneously establishing a favorable environment for private business concerns of his own and of some of the financial elites who supported him. Thus, he was able to win most of the country’s important actors over to his side, both the elites from the civil war militias and the financial elites (Corm 2005; Goenaga and Sánchez 2009).

The Lebanese SS, particularly its intelligence service, is an opaque, understudied area, and it is difficult to ascertain the power relations between the actors in it. This circumstance helps to explain why there are two distinct narratives regarding Hariri’s relationship with the intelligence service. The first, supported by authors such as Bosco (2009) and Blanford (2006), argues that Hariri was a victim of the Syrian secret service, which told him what policies...
to enact, extorted him financially, monitored him, and constantly put obstacles in his way. Authors such as Georges Corm (Corm 2005), on the other hand, argue that Hariri was the key figure in the institutional development and creation of state structures after the civil war, participating in the development of the Lebanese intelligence service and its relationship with the Syrians. According to this narrative, Hariri benefitted from both the Lebanese and Syrian services’ actions and information, thanks to his close relationship with the Syrian intelligence chief, General Ghazi Kanaan, and the Syrians responsible for administering Lebanon (Meur 2012).

It seems clear that when Hariri was prime minister, he only had direct control over the ISF (Goenaga and Sánchez 2009) and that, broadly speaking, the forces that reported to the General Security Directorate and the General Directorate of State Security were beyond his control, as were the military intelligence forces and Syrian intelligence forces acting in the country. However, as Amaia Goenaga notes: “In practice, the interaction between the three agencies was at the mercy of the personal relationships and interests established between the actors that controlled them. In fact, at least until April 2005, the only authority widely recognized by all these agencies without distinction, including the army, was the Syrian military-security establishment and its intelligence service” (Goenaga 2008, 93). Generally, then, the situation appears to reflect what authors such as Blanford (2006), Harris (2006, 281), and Geukjian (2014, 527) describe as a division of labor in Lebanon between the Syrian elites who controlled Lebanon and Hariri, in which the former had undisputed authority in the use of coercive resources in the country, while the latter was responsible for Lebanon’s social and economic policies. Until 1998, moreover, the Syrians responsible for administering Lebanon were close allies of Hariri, and even participated in some joint economic ventures with him (Meur 2012), benefitting from this alliance to improve their position in their home country. These actors supported Hariri against Lahoud to the extent possible, even though this led at times to strained relations with al-Assad. After losing their positions in the Lebanese system due to their conflicts with Assad, these Syrians stayed on good terms with their Lebanese allies, even expressing their regard in public.

10. For instance, Khaddam (who was removed from the administration of Lebanon in 1998), Shihabi (who was forced to resign that same year), and Kanaan (removed from his position in 2002).

11. Blanford (2006) includes several examples, from the electoral law imposed by Kanaan to enable Hariri’s victory in the 2000 elections to taking Hariri’s side against Lahoud in meetings between the pro-Syrian Lebanese elites and the Syrian intelligence in Lebanon.
In his first term, during which he worked on the institutional framework for the Second Republic, Hariri at no time questioned either the institutional organization of the different intelligence services (Syrian or Lebanese) or their actions in Lebanon (Corm 2005). In this respect, an anecdote told by Michael Kerr is illustrative. When the present author asked the US ambassador in Lebanon why he had not demanded that Syria respect the limits imposed by the Taif Agreement, the ambassador replied: “The Lebanese government didn’t ask us to” (Kerr 2006, 159). The explanation for this lay in the fact that although the SS was not directly under the control of the Lebanese government led by Hariri, he was nonetheless one of its main beneficiaries. Not only did he obtain direct, insider information from contacts and allies, but also the SS also helped to protect the system from possible opposition. As Goenaga and Sánchez (2009, 314) note: “The Lebanese intelligence services, along with Syrian military intelligence, were probably the regime’s most important instruments of sociopolitical control, responsible for decapitating any type of protest against the system.” Indeed, protests against the Lebanese system, whether social or community based, were a real risk during the 1990s. The response of the Hariri government to the mobilizations that challenged his policies was unceremonious coercion and repression that bypassed the state of law and crushed civil liberties. He did not hesitate, for example, to mobilize the army and declare a curfew in response to a general strike (Corm 2005; Dibeh 2005; Gambill and Abdelnour 2001).

After Lahoud became president and Hariri left the government, Hariri began to lose influence over the SS. This intensified in 2002 when his ally, Ghazi Kanaan, then head of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon, was replaced by Rustum Ghazaleh, a change ordained by al-Assad at the request of Lahoud (Meur 2012). From that time on, given that the intelligence services ultimately answered to their Syrian counterparts, Hariri lost practically all his ability to influence the state’s repressive forces. Moreover, as his adversaries at that time, both Lahoud and Assad, had few other power resources, they did not hesitate to use the SS in their confrontations with Hariri. It would appear that until this time, Corm’s hypothesis about Hariri being complicit with and a beneficiary of the Syrian and Lebanese state coercive forces is correct, but that subsequently, the narrative of Hariri as their victim is more consistent with the facts.

Even after 2000, when Hariri regained the post of prime minister, thanks to a solid victory at the polls, he continued to face confrontation from Lahoud and pressure from Damascus, with increasingly less room to maneuver. He
became convinced that his home was bugged; he discovered that one of the heads of the ISF was really working undercover for Syria; and he suspected that unexpected events (violent disturbances that increased pressure on the complex Lebanese system, veiled threats against him and his allies) were really intelligence acts (Blanford 2006).

The tension between Hariri and Assad was triggered by, first, Assad’s insistence that Lahoud stay in his position and, second, by the approval of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1559. Hariri had been quite relevant in the elaboration of this resolution that challenged the main Syrian levers of power to control Lebanon (Blanford 2006; Goenaga 2015). It was in this context that Hariri was assassinated on 14 February 2005 in an enormous explosion in the centre of Beirut, an act blamed by a large swath of the population on the Syrian and Lebanese secret services. After Syria’s subsequent withdrawal from Lebanon and the electoral victory of Hariri’s political heirs—but with Lahoud still holding the office of president—a battle broke out for control of the state’s repressive forces and intelligence services. With Syria further away, Lahoud progressively lost positions against a government supported by Western and Arab countries in this battle.

NEW POWER BALANCES AFTER THE SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL

The assassination of Hariri weakened the main actors on the two opposing sides in Lebanon. On the one hand, Hariri’s entourage had lost its essential component, which weakened it enormously, although it was able to rebuild quickly and knew how to take advantage of the political capital that it won through mass demonstrations and, then, subsequent elections. On the other hand, Lahoud was opened challenged, lost the assistance of the Syrian presence in Lebanon, and found himself in the final phase of his term. As a result, Hezbollah became the most significant actor in the March 8 Alliance. However, this alliance also included other important players, such as the elite connected to the Amal Movement and, shortly thereafter, Michel Aoun, neither of whom had a system of power resources as complete and powerful as that of Hezbollah.

Approved on 2 September 2004, this resolution calls for the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanese territory, a presidential election (in other words, that Lahoud not be reinstated), and the demilitarization of the militias still in existence in Lebanon, with special regard to Hezbollah (closely linked to Assad), but also to the Palestine militias, some of which were also allied with the Syrian president.
Unlike the other March 8 Alliance actors, Hezbollah took a very moderate position during the crisis period. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was very respectful of both Hariri’s family and the other March 14 Alliance actors, both Sunnis and Christians, trying to ease the general tension. Neither did he demand that Syria stay in Lebanon, something that would not have fitted well with his Lebanese nationalist discourse, but limited himself to emphasizing all the good that Syria had done for Lebanon and arguing that a close relationship should be maintained with the country’s Arab neighbor. Even so, his new position on the Lebanese political scene soon led him into direct confrontation with several of the actors from the March 14 Alliance who, from his point of view, were jeopardizing some of his key power resources.

In this context, Hezbollah found itself in a new, much more complicated situation. Under intense international pressure to disarm, the presence of both the Syrians and President Lahoud had guaranteed that decisions about strategic policies would not be made that ran counter to the group’s essential interests. This had allowed them to stay on the sidelines of the government, always maintaining a critical discourse and remaining untouched by the big corruption cases. However, in the new context, they were forced to enter more fully into the country’s institutionalization and asked to form part of the government. This also entailed openly joining the competition for control of the institutions. Instead of playing the opposition role of occasionally cordial competitor (although with some tension) of Hariri, Hezbollah now found itself in a relationship of distrust and conflict with his successors.

For their part, despite recovering control of the government and retaining strong international support, the heirs to Hariri were not in a particularly easy situation either, and Syria made things as difficult for them as it could in various areas. While Syria had clearly lost its clout in the SS, it was still able to wield substantial influence through its numerous allies (including Hezbollah, the Amal Movement, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Lebanese Ba’ath Party, President Lahoud himself, and the occasional armed Palestinian group sustained by Syria) (International Crisis Group (ICG) 2005a, 10–11). In fact, al-Assad himself declared that “The power and the roles of Syria in Lebanon are not dependent on the presence of Syrian forces there” (Harris 2006, 309).

It is difficult to confirm the illegal presence of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon and to know what activities they carried out. It is, however, clear that a climate of insecurity and terror reigned in Lebanon that was reminiscent of times that seemed to have been relegated to the past. During this period, a series of car bomb explosions occurred in the Christian neighborhoods, most
of them victimless, but creating an intense sensation of insecurity and awakening the ghosts of community fears. This situation was intensified by terrorist attacks that killed well-known critics of Syria, including George Hawi, a former communist leader, and Samir Kassir, a journalist, both of whom had been highly critical of the Syrian presence in Lebanon; there was also an attempt on the life of Élias Murr. Rumors circulated about the existence of a list of Lebanese to eliminate held by the Syrian secret services (ICG 2005a, 11). Some saw a clear attempt to destabilize the country completely with these acts on the part of Syria. Syrian workers in Lebanon also became victims of this climate of tension, with acts of aggression against them rising at an alarming and unnerving rate (Meur 2012, 121). Finally, rumors swirled that some former militias were to be rearmed and the US government was demanding that Hezbollah be disarmed, all of which further increased tension in the country. At the same time, the Mehlis investigation,13 which Hezbollah and other pro-Syrian groups accused of being politicized, also had much of the country on tenterhooks (ICG 2005a).

Thus, it appears that Syria was playing the (in-)security card in the competition for power in Lebanon. This revealed the lack of capacity and coordination among the Lebanese intelligence services as well as the March 14 Alliance government’s lack of control over them and its inability to provide the country with security. Thanks to this combination of factors, the March 14 Alliance government felt both an urgent need to establish agreements with foreign actors to reinforce its position in the Lebanese SS and the legitimacy to do so.

**SSR IN LEBANON AND THE CONFLICT OVER CONTROL OF THE SECURITY SECTOR**

It was in this context that the government of Fouad Siniora reached several bilateral agreements with different countries that provided support in the area of security. Already in 2005, the United States, France and the UK were involved. France conducted an audit and an inventory of the SS as preparation for a reform plan, the UK worked on delimiting the functions of the many overlapping agencies under the minister of defense, and the United States was asked to supply military

13. The international investigation into Hariri’s assassination, led by Judge Detlev Mehlis, established by UNSC Resolution 1595 and preceded by a fact-finding report by Peter FitzGerald at the request of the UN Secretary-General. Without identifying the guilty parties, the report implicated Syria, the Lebanese government, and the security sector in the country.
technology and infrastructure to control the mountainous border with Syria. At the same time, France and the United States had their own units investigating the recent cycle of terrorist attacks (ICG 2005a, 8–9). The first formal SSR program arrived in 2006 from the UK, and in 2007, the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) began working in Lebanon (Larzillière 2012, 15), followed by the Security and Rule of Law (SAROL) program financed by the European Union.

The first changes made as part of the reform with this support of foreign powers were not aimed at complying with the principles postulated in the SSR, but at gaining control of the SS by Hariri’s heirs and their allies. Bilal Y. Saab (Saab 2006), in no way suspected of being pro-Syrian, described the first steps of the reform as a “coup d’état” to the SS, with the leadership replaced by their own men. Other important changes implemented in the first phase included substantially increasing the number of ISF agents from thirteen thousand to nineteen thousand and creating a new intelligence service, the Information Office (Bureau d’information). Saab bemoaned the fact that: “The security appointment process has relied more on political patronage (most of the new security personnel are close to the March 14 coalition) and less on merit.” He also noted that this situation remained far from the SSR principles of good governance, stating that “The selection process defied the logic of positive competition and democratic politics” (n.p.).

The creation of the Bureau d’information, which many considered the only efficient unit in the ISF, with a well-trained staff capable of using advanced methods, emphasized even further the problem of overlap and the lack of coordination between the different Lebanese intelligence forces (Belloncle 2006; Nashabe 2009). This situation deteriorated when an intense rivalry broke out with the military intelligence services, although tensions appeared in general between the different intelligence forces, especially when several found themselves investigating the same case (Nashabe 2009). This revealed that the creation of the Bureau d’information did not correspond to any desire to solve the problems and limitations in the Lebanese intelligence services, but rather to have an intelligence service under their own control.

These changes in the SS clearly aroused suspicion (Belloncle 2006). Even in the Christian sector of the March 14 Alliance, the changes were viewed with concern and rejected. A WikiLeaks cable from the time reveals the anxiety expressed by Christian leader Samir Geagea to the US ambassador: “[Geagea] was alarmed that Hariri wanted to appoint his own man, Lt. Col. Wissam al-Hassan, to head the ISF intelligence branch. [Geagea] is worried that Hariri...
intends to expand the size and mission of the traditionally Sunni ISF intelligence branch to make it into a peer competitor with the traditionally Christian Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) G-2 and the traditionally Shia Surete General” (WikiLeaks 2006). Geagea viewed the matter as serious and harmful to himself in two ways: first, Christian leaders might lose positions to the Sunnis; and second, the March 14 Alliance Christian leaders were paying “a high political price with their Christian constituents” (WikiLeaks 2006), while their opponents (mainly Lahoud and Aoun) were being given more ammunition. In this respect, he mentioned that the Lebanese armed forces disagreed with the changes and were uneasy, something that Geagea worried would bring them closer to President Lahoud.

While those with close ties to the March 14 Alliance Sunni leaders were concerned about the use of the SSR process as a way to reinforce their control over the SS, their adversaries clearly saw it as a threat. In general, the members of the March 8 Alliance had fewer power resources than their adversaries and their primary weapon was their advantage in controlling the SS. Certainly, the Hariri faction felt its strategy legitimized by the wave of attacks that affected the March 14 Alliance, but the March 8 Alliance could easily see that it was being left in a situation of dangerous inferiority. Hezbollah, the most important group within the March 8 Alliance, was in an especially critical situation, perceiving an attack in the fact that the self-same foreign powers demanding their disarmament were also involved in the SSR process. The situation worsened when the March 14 Alliance leaders, who a few months earlier had made assurances that Hezbollah’s armed wing would be protected from international pressure, also began to demand that the group disarm. In fact, according to Pénélope Larzillière (Larzillière 2012, 15), one of the early objectives of the SSR was to disarm the Lebanese militias (in other words, Hezbollah, although also some Palestinian and other minor militias), a goal that was abandoned after the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel.

The competition to control the SS became one of the main conflicts in Lebanon. One sign of this is that two of the most important crises in the country after the 2006 war were directly related to this competition. The tensest episode was the crisis of 2008, when the government dismissed the security chief at the Beirut airport and threatened to disable a parallel telecommunication network belonging to Hezbollah. The telecommunication network had, critically, provided secure communications during the 2006 war, while control of the airport allowed the group, through an inside network, to oversee the
entry and exit of people, and possibly evading merchandise trafficking controls (ICG 2008).

Hezbollah’s response was camouflaged as a call for a general strike. However, the situation escalated rapidly, ending up with a mobilization of both the group’s armed wing and some like-minded militias (most notably the Amal Movement), which blocked the country’s strategic structures and took over the Sunni neighborhoods in Beirut. This Hezbollah action was unprecedented, more befitting a coup d’état, and took the country to the brink of an abyss. In the end, Hezbollah established its unquestionable military superiority but at an important political cost, especially in non-Shiite circles. However, Hezbollah made it quite clear from the beginning that it did not want to topple the government, but rather wanted the measures affecting its armed wing to be dropped and dialogue reopened, something that the government did not oppose.

The second particularly tense episode, although at a lower level, resulted from the assassination of Wissam al-Hassan, the head of the Bureau d’information, a key figure for the Sunni elite in the competition to control the SS who, among others, had discovered Hezbollah’s parallel telecommunication network and its control of a sector of the airport security services that produced the 2008 crisis (van Veen 2015). He had also collaborated with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in the investigation into the assassination of Hariri that had led to the indictment of some members of Hezbollah, dismantled an Israeli spy network, and discovered a plot by former minister Michel Samaha to instigate terror attacks in Lebanon (ICG 2012, 21). Erwin van Veen directly ties Hassan’s death to this competition to control the SS: “According to a number of interviewees, Hassan’s assassination was a direct consequence of his successful efforts to make the ISF intelligence branch more effective and more independent of Hezbollah. […] In short, according to some, he was posing a competitive threat to Hezbollah’s dominance of LAF and General Security (GS) intelligence” (van Veen 2015, 25).

However, other authors have argued that rather than being a strictly Lebanese matter, his assassination may have been more related to regional competition because of the important role that Hassan played in supporting the Syrian rebels: “Al-Hassan played a critical role channelling support from the Gulf states and the West to the Syrian rebels through Lebanon. This involved smuggling arms from Lebanon to Syria destined for opposition forces, providing a haven for Syrian defectors in Lebanon and allowing Syrian rebels to use Lebanese territory as a staging ground for attacks in Syria. His part in the Syrian opposition movement clearly made him a prime target for...
Syrian intelligence and indeed the Syrian regime had previously attempted to assassinate al-Hassan” (Stewart 2012, n.p.). In any case, his death created a strong sense of vulnerability among the Sunnis, weakened the position of Sunni elites in the competition to control the SS, and intensified the political confrontation between the Sunni and Shiite communities (ICG 2012; van Veen 2015).

All in all, however, SSR in Lebanon has not entailed, at least to date, any substantial progress in the supposed goals established for SSR, including rule of law, transparency, democratic control, and respect for human rights (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2005). More than respect for human rights, the main objective of the actors who launched the SSR process was to increase their control of the SS in a context in which this sector was being used as a power resource in the competition between various elites. This case serves to illustrate a dynamic that can be found in other contexts and is important to bear in mind in any analysis.

REFERENCES


